
Coastlines

Hurricane Oak

(A memoir of 1965, by Rebecca S. Orfila)

The only thing that could force me to voluntarily leave the safety of my high perch in the hurricane oak in my grandpa's yard was a palmetto roach. Should one of those great bugs come circling in crazy, overloaded flight or scooting on the craggy bark towards me, I would leap screaming at the top of my lungs from the tree, crashing with a racket, down into the formal boxwood bed underneath. My grandmother would clutch at her chest with one hand and her iced bourbon and cola in the aluminum tumbler with the other hand, certain that my crisis of the moment would send me to the local hospital emergency room. There were many crises, like so many roaches, flying at us in those days.

The old tree was dumped over on its side during the hurricane of September 27, 1906, but continued to grow out and up into a massive presence that served as silent witness to much of my childhood. The very same winded fury that deformed the tree had wiped out the shanty shacks in trashy Spanish Alley down by the river and overwhelmed the fishing boats anchored at the foot of Dauphin and Government Streets, but Mobile always seemed to survive the brutality of southern storms.

Despite its twisted appearance, the oak grew, forcing its truck under the chain link fence that divided Mr. Chester's land from ours. The massive canopy spread out casting its shade and supporting occasional threads of Spanish moss. Dark green-painted Adirondack chairs and a sturdy picnic table sat out on the thick Bermuda grass below along with various types of barbecue pits that were positioned out of the way, waiting patiently for my grandfather's next barbecuing experience.

The hurricane oak's horizontal trunk made it a perfect tree for climbing and until bras, periods, and adolescent angst took over, it served as the perfect seat from which I could observe larger events impact my small life. The South of the 1960's was a constant struggle of cultural bonding and angry distance. I was lucky to have lived then. Particularly lucky that I experienced it as a child.

My grandparents lived on the south side of Mobile, Alabama, on twenty acres of state owned property. Papa was the director of a small state trade school and Mama was an English teacher at the oldest public high school in town. My mother was their only child.

Papa was a short, muscular man, thick of chest and full of love for his family. He laughed a lot and found great joy in baseball, fishing, football, basketball, and the Lawrence Welk show. Born in Arab, Alabama, the youngest surviving child and the runt of the litter, he educated himself during the 1920's at Howard College in Birmingham where he met my grandmother. Pictures of him in his youth remind me of the handsome Valentino; hair parted down the middle, deep-set blue eyes and a confident air about himself. He could have become one of those short men with an overbearing way, but I never saw him be unkind to anyone or any creature.

Papa taught his grandkids how to play baseball as soon as we were steady on our feet. He would throw the plastic ball to us, over and over, until we achieved contact. The oversized orange, plastic bat leaned against a corner wall of their den for many years.

Mama was a beauty. Even at her death at age fifty-nine, she was chiseled perfection. Much taller at five feet 10 inches than her five feet 6-inch husband, she was poised and controlled in her behavior. Mama was very exacting. She was the judge of all things in our family whether it was behavior, fashion, or culture. She took it upon herself during one summertime visit to lower the hems of our dresses. The

old hem edge showed as a wear mark on our brightly colored dresses, but a Hint from Heloise suggested covering the fabric's scar with one of the many shades of crayons in the 64-pack. The tip worked.

Mama was also a real Southern woman, if for nothing more than she grew her own tomatoes. She made heavenly scuppernong preserves picked fresh from the arbor near their house, and put up bread and butter pickles from cucumbers that she harvested from a vegetable garden out by the pine forest. She set the standard for a clean house and urged her domestic help to adopt her procedures. She wore walking shorts and sleeveless shirts throughout her summer break from school.

One afternoon in the late summer of 1965, I sat on the tree's great bent trunk while the family went about its normal Saturday afternoon activities. My sister, Vivian, was reading in the swing, oblivious to the world around her. My younger brother, Will, was playing with his cars on the backdoor stoop, and Papa was starting up the barbeque when my mother summoned him to the back door to take a phone call. Momma had a worried look on her face.

Within a few minutes, he came back outside, just in time to meet a large black Buick sedan coming down the long driveway towards the house. The car pulled in at an angle in the parking places by the side yard. Three black men, dressed in suits, stepped out of the car. One man had a minister's collar around his neck.

We did not see many black men around our homes in those days, except for the fellows that worked around the school facility. Columbus and Willie were regular employees and part of the school maintenance crew, but I saw them out more often with the big tractors, mowing the acres of lawn

that surrounded the house. Always courteous and helpful, they quietly went about their work.

Papa greeted and shook hands with the visitors and chatted for a few minutes by the massive vehicle. I held on to the bark of the tree with the fleshy tips of my fingers and watched for several long minutes passed. I could not hear a word being said, but suddenly, one man pointed angrily at my grandfather. Papa stood still and did not respond.

“Jackie, quit that!” Momma said to me, rising up from her chair. “Come down here.” Her voice was low and hissy like an irritated cat. I climbed down from the tree, taking my time, catching last glances at the men across the driveway.

“Get in the house,” Momma directed us. Her direction, I learned later was simply to allow the men to have their discussion without the distraction of playful, nosey children.

Vivian, my older sister, nodded towards me. She was the second mother ducky. I followed her into the house. Will had been playing with his matchbox cars on the backdoor stoop and had not seen anything of the visitors.

We watched with our faces pressed to the sidelight windows of the back door at Mama as she lit another Kent cigarette and sat down just out of view of the men. She tapped the red embers of the cigarette on the metal bar of her ashtray.

Odd for a Saturday, Columbus came around the house at a hurried pace towards the direction of the side yard and passed from view.

It did not take long before my grandfather came round the far corner of the house with Columbus by his side. Papa looked placid, but Columbus’s jaw was hard set and his forehead was furrowed in a frown.

"It's all going to be fine," Papa said, loud enough for us to hear as they approached the back door.

In our family, you learned early on when to ask questions or when to hang back. This was the time to hang back, so I went outside to my tree. Through the kitchen window, I watched as Mama started frying flounder and hushpuppies for dinner. Papa was late to the table that night.

"What did he say, Matt?" my grandmother asked, as she spooned potato salad onto my plate.

"They called him yesterday. That was his preacher. He knew they were coming to pay a call. That's why he was here."

"And?"

"And according to the lawyer, they are suing for it to start the first of September." He bit into a hushpuppy. Papa continued munching the fried bread and dipped a short salad fork in a jelly glass of sliced cucumbers in vinegar. He laid the chilled cukes on his plate and sopped up the running vinegar juice with the last of the hush puppy.

"What about Columbus?" she asked after a moment.

"Columbus's not in trouble. I doubt anything will come of it."

"Will someone please tell us what happened?" I asked. Nine years old was plenty old enough in my mind to demand explanation and detail.

"Shush!" Vivian whispered at me.

"We had . . ." Papa started.

“Matt!” Mama cut him off. My grandfather had picked his battles that day.

Years later, after the 1960s had turned old and tragedies had throttled our nation, my mother explained what had happened that day.

The three men were from the NAACP with the goal to challenge the segregation of the trade school. They threatened court action and federal intervention. As Columbus had rounded the corner and saw Papa facing off three men of his race, he got involved in a big way. Interrupting at a high emotional moment, Columbus, a barely educated worker, stood toe to toe to the clergyman.

“He told them to get off the property, that they weren’t wanted here.” Momma paused to recall the moment. “The men called him an ‘Uncle Tom.’” This denigration was a crushing insult for a man who worked hard every day of his life.

“Daddy put his arm around Columbus’ shoulder and walked him into the house to avoid Columbus getting more upset,” Momma explained.

For the record, the school was integrated by court order and without difficulty. There were no threats of violence, no protests, no vandalism of student or school property. Columbus died in 1967.

Like Columbus, every black man that I knew in the school’s employ looked out for my grandfather. I saw more than one offer a steadying hand out to help Papa when he became shaky on his feet in later years. I would like to think they knew class when they saw it.